“We follow only the Qur’an and Sunnah”

by Muhammad Haq (Haq)

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Sitting in the mosque board meeting, as one issue after another was raised, I’ll confess it was difficult not to drift into my own thoughts. However, one issue was raised that caught my attention that was, perhaps not surprisingly, the issue of finance and fundraising: the mosque needed funds for refurbishing the ablution (*wuḍu*) area. Without much progress being made, I identified a possible source, although it was not problem-free. The source I suggested had a large proportion earned from unlawful sources; however, there was an opinion within *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), which allowed the utilisation of such funds for public good (*maslaḥa*).1 This objection was fairly raised by some, but as I started to explain how there was a scholarly opinion – “Forget the scholars!! We only follow the *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah,*” shouted a fellow member, whom I found uncharacteristic since this brother seemed to be a calm person. He then explained how Muslims should follow the *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah* only and leave aside the scholars to their own mumblings. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) he was older, held a more senior position than me, and most definitely had a louder voice than me and thus the saying “might makes right” had full effect. I looked down; although they took on my suggestion, I was somewhat frustrated at the rather superficial understanding of Islam this brother manifested. He was a brother of good character and a person who usually has a very pleasant demeanour, yet even he, when it came to *Fiqh*, could not escape this intolerant attitude.

This article aims to briefly take a look at the claim of some who say that they follow nothing but the “*Qur’ān* and *Sunnah”* or only the “*Qur’ān* and ***ṣaḥīḥ*** *Ḥadīth.”*

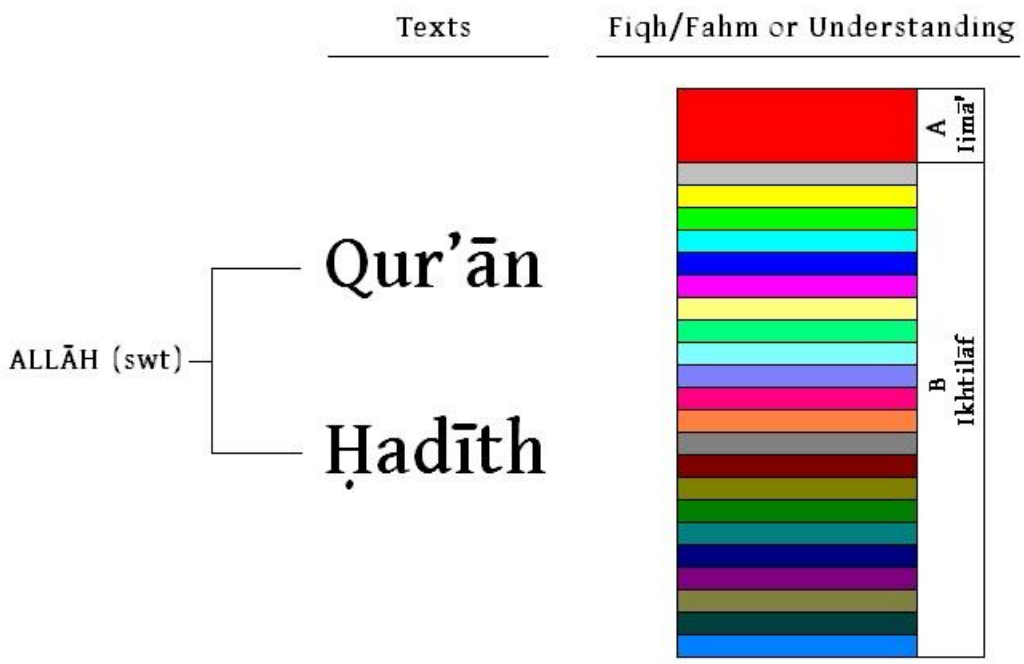
What is the purpose of this slogan? By merely using this term it seems a person alleges that any community member who does not affiliate with their group or understanding is not following the *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah*. When a person juxtaposes a valid legal (*Fiqhī*) opinion you’re following with “but you should follow the *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah,*” it implies that you aren’t. This attitude suggests truth is the monopoly of his/her group and the rest of the people are doomed.

What this also shows is that a person who takes this stance shows a lack of understanding of the process, by which the primary sources – the *Qur’ān* and *Ḥadīth* – are interpreted, and through which conclusions are reached.

Understanding How the Scholars Understand (*fahm*)

Look at the following diagram:

Figure 1



The primary sources in Islam are the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth*, both which originate from Allāh. Whilst the *Qur'ān* is directly from Allāh using His words, the *Ḥadīth* is relayed to us through the words of the Prophet ﷺ though the meaning is from Allāh. These words are then recorded in the form of a text, thus both the primary sources are texts. These texts are then understood by scholars/jurists/interpreters in efforts to decipher what God intended.2 This forms what is known as '*fiqh*'.3

One Understanding

Now in some issues (**A** – *Ijmā'*), there is only one understanding, one *fiqh* (as indicated by the red key colour in fig. 1). This means that the whole community of jurists are certain that what they have understood is actually what God intended. This is because either:

- The primary sources are clear-cut (*Qaṭ'ī*) in **both** their authenticity (*thubūth*) and meaning (*dalāla*). For example: the belief in monotheism, in the hereafter, the fact that the five daily prayers are *Farḍ* (obligatory).

- The primary sources are unclear (*Dhannī*) in **either** their authenticity **or** meaning, however a clear (*ṣarīḥ*), legitimate and genuine consensus has been reached. This means that there **is** a consensus and not just a claim of consensus.4 Yet such issues of agreement form the exceptions rather than the norm, as a brief look at any encyclopaedia of *Fiqh* proves. Based on this, Ibn Hazm explains how consensus is often erroneously claimed.5 What is interesting is that Ibn Hazm himself, may Allāh reward him, seems to fall into this error when he drew up his own list of issues in which he thought a consensus had been reached.6 Ibn Taymiyya later followed up Ibn Hazm's list of issues of alleged

consensus, and showed some areas in which Ibn Hazm erroneously claimed a consensus, when there was in fact none.[7]

Thus in such issues everyone **is** "following the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah,"* therefore repeatedly chanting "*only Qur'ān* and *Sunnah*" is made redundant.

Many Understandings

Most issues however have a wide range of scholarly understandings (fig. 1. **B** – *Ikhtilāf,* the different views indicated by the different colours), all of which do go back to the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth*. These varying views may be due to several reasons, which can be summarised into the following[8]:

- While the sources that relate to the particular ruling are agreed upon, the understanding of that *Ḥadīth* differs; hence it is the *fahm* (understanding) that is leading to the *Ikhtilāf* (difference of opinion). A clear example of this during the time of the companions is the incident of the ᶜAṣr prayers at Banī Qurayẓa.[9]

- The source in relation to that issue is differed over, due to reasons such as a dispute in authenticity, or whether it was abrogated or not, or whether it is related directly to the issue under discussion.[10] Thus whilst some jurists use a certain *Ḥadīth* and base rulings on it, others do not due to the aforementioned reasons.

Less Than Certain – Still No Rebuking

Sometimes jurists are not 100% certain that what they have understood or the ruling that they have arrived at is **actually** what Allāh had intended. This follows the process as:

1. Their understanding/views are all based on a sound interpretation (*Ijtihād*);

2. The primary sources are not clear-cut, which means Allāh deliberately did not reveal His will clearly;[11]

3. There is no other means of verifying the will of Allāh other than through understanding the primary sources, since revelation has ceased with the demise of the Prophet ﷺ.

No one can condemn another for holding a valid view. "There is no *inkār* (rebuking) in matters of *ikhtilāf*[12]" and "an *Ijtihād* is not made redundant by another *Ijtihād*[13]". This means that such differences will **always** exist and no amount of insistence on "***ṣaḥīḥ*** *Ḥadīth"* will help unify them.

Is There A Way To Certainty In Such Issues?

No. The only situation in which one can be fully certain (*Yaqīnan*) that he is on the correct opinion in issues to which the primary sources are less than clear-cut, is if they receive further clarification from God. This is known as revelation (*waḥi*). Now this happened with the Prophet ﷺ when he made an *Ijtihād* and decided to take ransom from the captives of the battle of Badr. The companion Abu Bakr (ra) agreed with the Prophet ﷺ but `Umar (ra) disagreed. Allāh agreed with `Umar (ra) and made this known to the Prophet ﷺ using stern words (Qur'ān, 8:67-68) which caused the Prophet ﷺ and Abu Bakr (ra) to weep. As the Prophet ﷺ is no longer with us, and there is no prophet coming after him, this medium of clarification from God has ended, and thus no one can claim such an authority. And even if they did, they would have gone against clear-cut (*Qaṭ'ī*) texts, which negate such a possibility (i.e. *wahi*) after the Prophet ﷺ and thus anyone claiming this would be committing blasphemy and render their *Imān* (faith) void.

Points to Consider

There are several points,14 which are worth keeping in mind so that the simple notion of "only *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah"* can be avoided.

1. An Oversimplified Perception

If all that has been mentioned is understood, then it is simple to see how futile it is to continuously hurl the slogan of "only the *Qur'ān* and *ṣaḥīḥ Ḥadīth*15" especially in matter of difference of opinion (disregarding the reasons as to why the differences arose in the first place16). Indeed as Ibn Taymiyya stated,17 such differences arise rarely because the scholars based their opinion on whim or arbitrarily formed rulings. If that was the case, then chanting "*ṣaḥīḥ Ḥadīth*" is understandable, as one would think, "if only they knew of the Ḥadīth, then all differences will cease." However this is not the case, thus it is useless to suggest that by following the *Qur'ān* and '*ṣaḥīḥ' Ḥadīth*, all differences will cease.

Consequently, every time someone acts upon an opinion about which the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth* are not clear, they are following an understanding of someone. This person can be a scholar or a non-scholar. Thus Ḥanafis, Mālikis, Ḥanbalis and Shāfi'īs are simply being honest when they admit that they are following one understanding of the primary sources out of many. However the person who refuses to adhere to the legal schools mentioned, nor admits to following any other scholar/jurist, but instead claims to follow the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* directly, and independently, the question remains: whose understanding are they following?18

2. Pretentious Certainty

Moreover what this also shows is that if someone, a scholar or non-scholar, gives the impression that their view regarding a *dhannī* (unclear) matter, is somehow **objectively** the **only** correct view, that somehow they have by-passed the '*fahm'* as indicated in fig. 1 above, and have approached the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth* **directly** as they may say, then one should be cautious of this person's methodology, as this is impossible. His opinion is only one of many (as indicated by the

different colours in fig. 1). One cannot deny history, or the natural human process of interpretation. Every text thus approached and every ruling issued, was achieved by the human agent through interpretation. If one is not a prophet, then one cannot claim to have just 'known.' This means that there must be a methodology upon which such an understanding was based on. It is vital that we know what this methodology is to see the logic and evidence of the said opinion. If this is the case, and this person is denying this very human aspect then either:

- They themselves are unaware of their methodology and somehow think that they are actually approaching the texts 'directly,' similar to how Prophets receive information disconnected to history and context.
- They are either knowingly or unknowingly (good opinion obliges us to hold the former) hiding their methodology, to inject their opinion with an aura of false objectivity, and through this they wish to acquire more followers. In other words, to put it in bluntly, it is merely a marketing ploy.19

An Example

This attitude also seems to manifest itself towards how people approach the text *Fiqh al-Sunnah*. It is as if many people have misunderstood the purpose of the text and think this is literally what the title suggests, "The understanding of the *Sunnah*" without the human agent or *fahm*. Yet this is belied by the fact that the author, Sayyid Sabiq, states various understandings when he covers the many different issues. Thus to take this book as representing the 'real Sunnah,' and to take for example the Ḥanafī text *Mukhtaṣar al-Qudūrī* or the Maliki text *Mukhtaṣar al-Khalīl* as being 'biased' shows that one clearly fails to understand the dynamics of text-understanding, since if this applies to all human beings, it surely applied to the author of Fiqh al-Sunnah.20 The blame in such a case however, rests on the reader and not on the author. One must be careful of a fetish for certainty in an area that offers none. Such indulgences are as bad as the desire for speculation in an area which is clear-cut

1. The Secondary and Tertiary sources

Another obvious fact that seems to be ignored when one insists **everything** must be mentioned from the primary sources explicitly is the negation of several other sources, secondary and tertiary. The fact is that everything is not explicitly mentioned in the primary texts (Qur'an and Sunnah). A quick look at the Islamic Juristic legacy shows that not only were there primary sources, but based on this, there were also secondary sources of authority – Consensus (*Ijmā'*) and Analogy (*Qiyās)* as well several tertiary sources. Moreover, there were different maxims developed after scholars' surveyed different rulings in order to facilitate the jurist to encompass them with ease. This attitude also overlooks the highly developed *maqāsid* (teleological) theories of Islamic law by the likes of scholars such as imām al-Shatibi.

2. *Ḥasan Ḥadīth*

Lastly, when one insists on accepting nothing short of *ṣaḥīḥ Ḥadīth,* it implies the non-acceptance of another category of *Ḥadīth, which* is below the *ṣaḥīḥ* in authenticity, although is still used for purposes of law. This "lower classed" type of *Ḥadīth* is known as the *Ḥasan Ḥadīth.*

Is This Really Relevant?

Yes. This subject is relevant since if it was only 'a few brothers in the mosque' adopting such an attitude it could easily be avoided or changed. Yet it is worrying when one tunes into Islamic channels to find 'accepted scholars' pushing this line of thinking, helping to create a culture of narrow-mindedness and bigotry. It is not surprising that some of the masses are adopting this very attitude. So one is left to think that the TV scholar's is the **only** authentic opinion, and the rest are baseless or weak. But this has many negative sociological problems, from breaking the unity in the mosque, to causing rifts within the family, and eventually creating a community at war with each other. Ultimately it means the Muslim community becomes what Prophet Ibrahim supplicated against: from becoming "a *fitna*[21] for the Non-Muslims" (Qur'ān, 60:5) as their social discord projects Islam as a backward and intolerant faith.

If one hears someone adopting such an attitude it may help to remain cautious, ask them if there is a difference of opinion on the matter, and the basis of such a difference. One may also want to ask another scholar of a different orientation in order to maintain a balance and not become a fanatic (*muta'aṣṣib*).

Conclusion

The purpose of this short paper was **not** to attack specific members of the Muslim community or specific groups. It was rather to highlight an unhealthy trend that breeds a culture of intolerance. Finally it was to highlight and emphasise the fact that legal differences in *dhannī* matters are part and parcel of Islam, and simply insisting on following *ṣaḥīḥ Ḥadīth* will not decrease this. The jurists of the past and present, either directly or indirectly, ultimately base their understandings on the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah,* hence it is nothing short of self-delusional to think it's the luxury of a few individuals in exclusion to the rest.

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1. See the fatwa issued by the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR). ↩
2. This is according to those who hold that there is only one correct opinion with Allah, and the jurist, through his interpretive efforts, seeks to expose this opinion. If they achieve this, then the jurist gets two rewards, and if the jurist errors and arrives at a conclusion/ruling contrary to what is with Allah, he gets one reward for trying. There is however a difference of opinion on this matter. ↩

3. The fact that Fiqh is human and not divine is something that is accepted by scholars and jurists without dispute, and is mentioned by several scholars. ↩

4. The books of Fiqh often claim consensus in many areas, although there is a clear difference of opinion. This is probably because the scholar who claims it is unaware of the difference that exists or does not want to give any credibility to the scholarly differences that exists and hence disregards the difference and claims a consensus all in a bid to add more authority to a given opinion, which he (almost always a male scholar) usually follows. ↩

5. Muhammad Ibn Hazm. al-Iḥkām.fī Uṣū*l al-A*ḥkām. 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda, no date) Vol. 4, pp.128-143. ↩

6. Ibn Hazm. Marātib al-Ijmā'. 3rd Ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīda. 1982). ↩

7. Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah. Naqd Marātib al-Ijmā' (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr. 1988). ↩

8. Perhaps in another article actual examples can be analysed indicating how even authentic texts have given rise to a difference of opinion. ↩

9. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhāri & Muslim. For an explanation, see my article "Islamic Law: Between 'Selecting' and 'Negating' a Position". ↩

10. Ibn Taymiyya. Raf' al-Malām 'an al-A'imma al-A'lām (Riyadh: al-Ri'āsa al-Āmma li Idārāt al-Buhūth al-'Ilmiyya wa al-Iftā' wa al-Da'wā wa al-Irshād. 1983). ↩

11. Ibn Hazm. *Al-Iḥkām*. Vol. 4. Pgs. 132-3. ↩

12. Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī. Mukhtasar Minhāj al-Qāsidīn. (Damascus: Maktaba Dār al-Bayān. 1978) pg. 127. Similarly other prominent scholars are said to have made similar statements including the righteous leader Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, Imāms Malik, Ahmad, Sufyan al-Thawri, al-Nawawi. Ibn Taymiyya, may Allah reward them all. ↩

13. See *al-Ashbāh wa al-Naẓâ'ir* of both Imām Ibn Nujaym (Hanaf ī) and Imām Suyuti (Shāfi'ī). ↩

14. This list is not exclusive but simply highlights some significant points. ↩

15. This can be noticed, especially on TV programs, where some scholars and students constantly emphasis the "*ṣaḥīḥ*" aspect of the Prophetic tradition they are basing their ruling on to the point of giving the impression that those who differ with them must surely be following a weak opinion or worse their whim. ↩

16. This usually indicates an absence or a lack of critical studies of the foundations of Islamic law (*uṣul*). ↩

17. Ibn Taymiyya. *Raf' al-Malām.* ↩

18. The point here is not whether one must follow one *madhab* in all issues, but about identifying the scholarly understanding one is basing his/her action on. ↩

19. Other attempts at making one's opinion seem as if it is the **only** correct view is the inaccurate claim of a consensus, when in actual fact, there isn't any. ↩

20. This does not mean that the texts of the four Sunni schools of thought are free of bias and any other text belonging to another necessarily has a bias. The point is that, whilst the texts of the four schools of thought usually admit their orientation and hence possible bias, texts which claim to fully represent 'the *Sunnah'* do not admit this, and hence run the risk of misleading the reader by giving the impression that its word if final, and any difference existing is invalid or baseless. Thus when a Mālikī text, for example, states that x is *Sunnah* or preferred, the reader is aware that this is the Mālikī understanding and hence will not be taken aback with the presence of another scholarly understanding on the same issue. ↩

21. This word has many denotations. In this context it can mean a cause of suffering.

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Muhammad Haq was born and raised in the United Kingdom. He studied the Islamic Sciences (Sharia) for several years in the UK under the tutelage of many shayukh in the United Kingdom (may Allah preserve them). He has a particular interest in Fiqh and its related sciences. Currently he is studying for a Bachelors in Comparative Religion and is involved with several grassroots projects.